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ALEXANDER HAMILTON:
SLAVERY, POLITICS, AND CLASS STATUS

Sara J. Weyenberg

Alexander Hamilton: Slavery, Politics, and Class Status

Introduction

Though slavery is often connected with the Civil War, it was also a topic of great interest during the Revolutionary period. Many people had strong opinions on the morality of slavery, and they were not afraid to voice them. There are countless writings that, if nothing else, at least touch on the subject briefly. As one might imagine, there were people on both sides of the fence – those who took offense and those who did not. A new country was about to be born, and slavery provided just one of the tensions that was in existence at the time. When so many other issues were at hand, slavery was often placed on the back burner and ignored by many people.

At this same time in history, a young Alexander Hamilton was just cutting his teeth in the political world. Hamilton is perhaps best known for having had his face on the ten dollar bill, as the first Secretary of the Treasury, and his close proximity to George Washington. Hamilton represented the well-known ‘rags to riches’ life story, providing himself with a successful career in the military, politics, and law. Having met an early end in a duel with Aaron Burr, Hamilton’s life was in no way lacking accomplishments.

A lesser discussed area of Hamilton’s life was his personal stance on slavery in the American colonies. His upbringing on the Caribbean islands of Nevis and St. Kitts deeply influenced his reasoning about slavery. His childhood put him into close quarters with the truths of slavery and the slave trade which followed him into his adult life and helped him to develop his opinions against slavery. His opinions were both shared and countered by other citizens during the Revolutionary period and there were countless discussions and writings regarding the topic. In any event, historian John Smith observed that

Hamilton achieved his success by the profound influence which he exerted on the public mind. No statesman in our history has ever swayed so many of the leading men among his contemporaries as Hamilton, and at the same time he appealed by his pen to the largest popular audience of any man of his time.¹

This means that Hamilton had to be very conscious of what he said because of the influence he had among his contemporaries. It is most likely that he was also aware that he held such an influence, meaning that he could have used it to his advantage, both in terms of slavery and in general. How Hamilton manipulated his influence could determine entire policies, as his reach was so great at the time. But did he do this to push his agenda with slavery? Were his views commonplace during the Revolutionary era? How many others shared his opinion? To what extent did his childhood influence his position on slavery? Was his class status more important to him than his morals were?

The accepted view of Hamilton's opinion of slavery is that he was an abolitionist and in opposition to slavery. This viewpoint helps to further elevate his somewhat saintly position as one of America's founding fathers. After all, the founding fathers are exalted for their sense of justice and beliefs in freedom for all. Hamilton warned that "The page of history is replete with instances that loudly warn us to beware of slavery"². The question begs to be answered of if Hamilton's contemporaries were willing to heed this warning or if they would sweep it under the rug. Historian Michelle DuRoss argues, however, that not only was Hamilton not openly against slavery, but that it would have stifled his personal agenda. It is, of course, possible that portions of both of these opinions are true and that while Hamilton may have had personal qualms about slavery, he probably was not always openly declaring it in the public sector. An evaluation of

¹ Henry Cabot Lodge, "Preface" in *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge Federal Edition, 12 volumes. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), Vol. 1.

² Alexander Hamilton, "A Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress" In *Ibid*, Vol. 1.

DuRoss's claims and a closer examination of Hamilton's writings as well as behavior may resolve this mystery. Understanding Hamilton's opinions about slavery would help to clarify the reputation and character of one of America's beloved founding fathers. In order to understand Hamilton's thoughts on slavery, however, one must also understand the views and actions of the common population in order to provide some context, and possibly reveal some of the influences upon Hamilton's opinions. While his opinions are the focus, a lot of insight can be shed by looking at the overwhelming view of the populace.

In the years leading up to and including the American Revolution, words such as 'liberty' and 'freedom' were commonly spoken and written. The colonists were seeking freedom from taxation and from what they believed to be the oppression of the mother country, England. How could a group of people so sensitive to the concept of liberty be able and willing to hold about twenty percent of their population in slavery? The answer is not so different than in the years leading up to the Civil War. Most of the southern colonies, especially the Deep South like South Carolina and Georgia, relied heavily upon slavery for the economy to remain stable and profitable. Slavery provided cheap and efficient work on the many plantations that were spread across the land. It is to be noted that "it was ... the political problem with the deepest social and economic roots in the new nation, so that removing it threatened to disrupt the fragile union just as it was congealing."³ Many in the North were opposed to slavery and wanted to see it abolished, but there was far more concern for solidifying the ties between colonies than there was ending slavery. The abolition of slavery threatened to turn all hopes of a new country on its head by upsetting the balance that existed between the North and the South and producing new tensions that were not really necessary at the time, in a practical sense.

³ Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Vintage Books 2000).

This is not to say that nobody was speaking about slavery in personal correspondence and in casual encounters. Though many found it to be a touchy subject politically and professionally, they were often willing to openly discuss their views with the people they were closest to. For instance, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, “I wish most sincerely there was not a slave in this province. It always appeared a most iniquitous scheme to me — to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have.”⁴ What Adams wrote mirrored the feelings of many people during the years leading up to and during the American Revolution, especially in the northern colonies.

Both Adams and Hamilton were politically active individuals, both often associated with the anti-slavery movement. It is generally accepted that Alexander Hamilton was in opposition to slavery and led the life of an abolitionist. While his actions may not have always reflected this, his writings often did. In writing to John Jay, Hamilton recognized that “The contempt we have been taught to entertain for the blacks, makes us fancy many things that are founded neither in reason nor experience.”⁵ Hamilton openly acknowledged, as many did, that the beliefs that society had about African-Americans were not based on anything that had actually happened and were, in fact, not even validated by any sort of logical process. Many scholars agree that this was the common view which Hamilton held. However, Michelle DuRoss⁶ argues just the opposite of many scholars, and with compelling evidence. Her arguments rely on the workings of social classes during the years around and including the American Revolution and how Hamilton may have manipulated his beliefs in order to establish himself in social circles. An evaluation of her views, along with independent research on the subject, will permit a more careful evaluation of Hamilton’s views on the topic of slavery.

⁴ Abigail Adams, Abigail Adams to John Adams, September 24, 1774.

⁵ Alexander Hamilton, Alexander Hamilton to John Jay, March 14, 1779.

⁶ More on DuRoss’ studies will follow in later paragraphs where more attention can be paid to the details.

Lowly Beginnings

Alexander Hamilton's childhood was spent in the West Indies, meaning that he was in constant contact with the slave trade and slavery from an early age, which would no doubt have contributed to his opinions regarding slavery later on in life. He and his brother, James, were born out of wedlock, and so experienced the lives of an outcast firsthand as they were not readily accepted into most of society themselves. Both boys had to work hard to help support the family, and so they were familiar with lives spent under the rule of another person. Service to others was something they saw for themselves every day.

Of the twenty-four thousand residents on [St. Croix], twenty-two thousand of them were black slaves. Again, Alexander and James were growing up in a slave society and observing its daily practice, an experience that would shape

Alexander's attitude about race and slavery for the rest of his life.⁷

Many scholars argue that his youth in the West Indies is what shaped and developed his complete opinion on slavery and that his illegitimacy meant that "as an outcast himself, he may have in some ways identified with the slave's depressed and despised position in West Indian society."⁸ It would not be a great leap to suppose that Hamilton looked back on his own childhood when developing his opinions on the treatment of other human beings, particularly that of African-Americans. It is human nature to have sympathy for those with shared situations, so it would make sense that Hamilton would understand the plight of slaves and find it relatable and therefore have sympathy for them.

When it came to the American Revolution, historian James Horton has described how Hamilton

⁷ James Oliver Horton, "Alexander Hamilton: Slavery and Race in a Revolutionary Generation." *The New-York Journal of American History* 65, no. 3 (2004): 16-17.

⁸ Ibid.

... was fully aware that the American Revolution would ultimately be judged by whether it lived up to its own principles. To be sure, Hamilton devoted most of his enormous energy to the more immediate tasks of “nation-building,” but this does not mean that he simply neglected the issue of slavery ... Hamilton was steadfastly committed to the eventual abolition of slavery...⁹

Though there are very little concrete facts that support Hamilton’s involvement with the antislavery movement, there are countless writings of his that indicate that he was sensitive to the quality of life for slaves and their hope for eventual emancipation. In “The Farmer Refuted” (1775), Hamilton said “... in a state of nature, no man had any *moral* power to deprive another of his life, limbs, property, or liberty; nor the least authority to command or exact obedience from him, except that which arose from the ties of consanguinity.”¹⁰ This statement appears to be strongly against slavery. However, the lines get blurry, for Hamilton also mentioned that no man could be deprived of property, and slaves were considered property. So the question arises: did Hamilton think of slaves as people or property or both? And if both, how could both their liberty and the property of the slave-owner be protected at the same time? He somewhat touches on how an individual person is property in “A Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress” when he said

The only distinction between freedom and slavery consists in this: In the former state a man is governed by the laws to which he has given his consent, either in person or by his representative; in the latter, he is governed by the will of another.

In the one case, his life and property are his own; in the other, they depend upon

⁹ James Oliver Horton, “Alexander Hamilton: Slavery and Race in a Revolutionary Generation” *The New-York Journal of American History* 65, no. 3 (2004): 16.

¹⁰ Alexander Hamilton, “The Farmer Refuted”. In *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (Federal Edition). New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904. Vol. 1.

the pleasure of his master. It is easy to discern which of these two states is preferable. No man in his sense can hesitate in choosing to be free, rather than a slave.¹¹

Though this may not speak of Hamilton's personal stance, he did indicate that he recognized which state was better and therefore sympathized with those enslaved. He quite clearly stood against it in the same document when he said

Were not the disadvantages of slavery too obvious to stand in need of it, I might enumerate and describe the tedious train of calamities inseparable from it. I might show that it is fatal to religion and morality; that it tends to debase the mind, and corrupt its noblest springs of action. I might show that it relaxes the sinews of industry, clips the wings of commerce, and introduces misery and indigence in every shape.¹²

Little else is needed to show that Hamilton clearly did not support slavery, and actually, found it was a hindrance on society. As he stated, he thought that slavery placed a bad influence on the economy, a place where he saw room for partnership between whites and African-Americans.

Hamilton believed

that black people might be good international economic partners and reliable political allies. When a slave revolt in the spring of 1792 became a revolution that brought the independent nation of Haiti into existence in 1804, [Hamilton] and other Federalists lent support.¹³

¹¹ Alexander Hamilton, "A Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress". In *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (Federal Edition). New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904. Vol. 1.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ James Oliver Horton, "Alexander Hamilton: Slavery and Race in a Revolutionary Generation." *The New-York Journal of American History* 65, no. 3 (2004): 23.

This is one of few instances when Hamilton actually took action in showing his support of the antislavery movement rather than just making statements about it.

Quite often, Hamilton's attention was elsewhere as founding a nation was a full-time job. Sometimes when he was writing about his thoughts on the government they were trying to build, it could be indirectly applied to slavery. For instance, he wrote

The experience of past ages may inform us, that when the circumstances of a people render them distressed their rulers generally recur to severe, cruel, and oppressive measures. Instead of endeavoring to establish their authority in the *affection* of their subjects, they think they have no security but in their *fear*. They do not aim at gaining their fidelity and obedience by making them flourishing, prosperous, and happy, but by rendering them abject and dispirited. They think it necessary to intimidate and awe them to make every accession to their own power, and to impair the people's as much as possible.¹⁴

Though this is clearly an argument against a government that rules with fear and intimidation, it also reflects on the relationship between slaves and slave owners. Many slave owners maintained their power through fear tactics, such as severe beatings or whippings, rather than earning the trust and loyalty of their slaves through good treatment. This kind of behavior would be a hindrance on any African-Americans' attempt at making a better life for themselves or their ability to behave as a member of society. Surely this treatment was intentional, for slave owners wanted to hold slaves back; allowing them to improve themselves would put the slave owners at risk of losing cheap labor and having to replace it with more expensive laborers. Still, this relationship between a government and its citizens and between slave owners and slaves shows

¹⁴ Alexander Hamilton, "The Farmer Refuted". In *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (Federal Edition). New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904. Vol. 1.

how Hamilton's mind was on two things at once. He was concerned about slavery, but he was also dealing with the pressures of developing a new nation. However, while Hamilton focused on nation building, many other people had the time to spare in thinking about slavery and what exactly it meant in a time when liberty was such an important concept.

Fight for Freedom

The American Revolution was about liberty, to put it obviously. The colonists were fighting for their own place in the world, separate from the mother country. Slavery, of course, was a direct contradiction to everything they were fighting for. Surely it was on everyone's minds that their actions were more than a little hypocritical,

... for while everyone believed in liberty and everyone knew that slavery was its denial ... fewer still lent active support to the developing antislavery movement, however logically it followed from the principles of the Revolution.¹⁵

Slavery should have been, based on this, the next step in the direction of total freedom which colonists so ardently believed in. However, slavery was, presumably, too convenient and at the time "necessary" for the country to remain solid and for the economy to continue to grow. There was fear that an attempt to abolish slavery so early in the country's existence would upset the consistency and relationship between the separate colonies which would in turn threaten the stability of the new nation.

The main question that colonists faced was this: should the freedom they were fighting for also include the rights of slaves? Thomas Hutchinson criticized the Declaration of Independence by

¹⁵ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992.

condemning the apparent history of a people who declared that all men were created equal, endowed with inalienable rights, and yet deprived “more than a hundred thousand Africans of their rights to liberty and *the pursuit of happiness*, and in some degree to their lives.”¹⁶

Many agreed with Hutchinson that earning freedom only for whites was unfair, including Hamilton who said, “We are determined to show ... that we know the value of freedom.”¹⁷ Though Hamilton declared this, all people did not quite take the true definition of ‘freedom’ to heart. In this case, who was the “we” that Hamilton was referring to if so many people relied on slavery or felt that there was no need to abolish it? It can be said, based on this, that though many people sought out the true value of liberty, they were perhaps blinded by it too easily, believing that while freedom belonged to them, it did not have to include everyone and slaves could safely be an exception to the rule.

There were still those, such as Hutchinson, who could see clearly how unbalanced the fight for true freedom was becoming. These people shared a collective guilt about those enslaved, though very little was done to act on it. Some were avid members of the antislavery movement, but the majority of the population was not, at least openly. The minority who were involved in the antislavery movement “came to think of slavery not only as a moral wrong but also of antislavery as a moral good, perhaps even a moral duty”¹⁸ which indicates that ideas about slavery were beginning to transform in the minds of colonists. Even John Laurens, a close friend of Hamilton’s, acknowledged that slavery was hypocritical by writing:

¹⁶ Thomas Hutchinson as quoted by Bernard Bailyn. Bailyn, Bernard. *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992.

¹⁷ Alexander Hamilton, “A Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress”. In *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (Federal Edition). New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904. Vol. 1.

¹⁸ Christopher Leslie Brown, “The American Revolution Prompted New Debates About Slavery”. *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (2006).

I think we Americans at least in the Southern Colonies, cannot contend with a good Grace, for Liberty, until we shall have enfranchised our Slaves. How can we whose Jealousy has been alarm'd more at the Name of Oppression sometimes than at the Reality, reconcile to our spirited Assertions of the Rights of Mankind, the galling abject Slavery of our negroes. . . . If as some pretend, but I am persuaded more thro' interest, than from Conviction, the Culture of the Ground with us cannot be carried on without African Slaves, Let us fly it as a hateful Country, and say ubi Libertas ibi Patria [where Liberty is there is my Country].¹⁹

While he showed his displeasure for the institution of slavery, he also notes that some believe that having African slaves is a requirement for portions of the new country. He also points out how colonists were easily upset by the notion of oppression by the mother country, even if true oppression had not befallen them. They were so sensitive to the concept when it affected themselves, but cared nothing for it when applied to someone else, such as African-American slaves.

At the same time, “slaves demanded they be included in the liberty for which America was fighting,”²⁰ possibly because they felt that their own freedom would closely follow that of the colonists. Perhaps some of the best arguments against slavery came from the words of African-Americans themselves. Pointing out that colonists were fighting for the same thing as slaves were, “people of this province seem to be actuated by the principles of equity and justice, [slaves] cannot but expect your house will again take [their] deplorable case into serious

¹⁹ John Laurens, John Lauren’s Black Regiment Proposal. In “Slavery and Liberty in the American Revolution” by Gregory D. Massey. *The Early American Review* (Winter/Spring 2003).

²⁰ James Oliver Horton, “Alexander Hamilton: Slavery and Race in a Revolutionary Generation.” *The New-York Journal of American History* 65, no. 3 (2004): 19.

consideration, and give [them] that ample relief which, *as men*, [they] have a natural right to.”²¹

Beyond this, they concluded “that Liberty is Equally as pre[c]ious to a *Black man*, as it is to a *white one*, and Bondage Equally as intolerable to the one as it is to the other.”²² Slaves also raised the question that everyone had to ask themselves during this time: “... but from what authority they assume the power to dispose of our lives, freedom, and property, we would wish to know.”²³ Both sides of the debate used religious texts to back themselves, but the truth of it is that the question raised by slaves was a very good one that would remain for many years.

Considering that white men thought black men were illiterate brutes, these African-American writers provided clear and concise points and questions that would rival those of a contemporary white man. At the time, however, this was no matter and was easily pushed aside and ignored by many. Their arguments were treated as if they did not even have a chance of making sense or being intelligent.

Including slaves in the fight for freedom was not something that was swept under the rug. Hamilton himself championed a plan that put slaves in battalions. He advocated raising “two three or four batalions [sic] of negroes; with the assistance of the government of that state, by contributions from the owners in proportion to the number they possess.”²⁴ Many were against plans such as these, assuming that their personal property was being threatened by offering slaves freedom if they served in the military or that arming slaves would give them the means to rise against their owners rather than against the British. Still others thought that slaves could not make good soldiers, another point which Hamilton wrote about:

²¹ Peter Bestes, Sambo Freeman, Felix Holbrook, and Chester Joie. “Peter Bestes, Sambo Freeman, Felix Holbrook, Chester Joie to the town representatives, April 20, 1773”, in *Sir, The Efforts Made by the Legislative of This Province...Boston (1773)*.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Nero Brewster, et al. “Petition to New Hampshire Legislature, Nov. 12, 1779”. In “Slavery in New Hampshire” by Isaac W. Hammond. *Magazine of American History* 21 (January-June 1889): 62-65.

²⁴ Alexander Hamilton, Alexander Hamilton to John Jay, March 14, 1779. In *The Founders’ Constitution*, edited by Phillip B. Kurland and Ralph Lerner. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, 1:527.

I have not the least doubt, that the negroes will make very excellent soldiers, with proper management.... I mention this, because I frequently hear it objected to the scheme of embodying negroes that they are too stupid to make soldiers. This is so far from appearing to me a valid objection that I think their want of cultivation (for their natural faculties are probably as good as ours) joined to that habit of subordination which they acquire from a life of servitude, will make them sooner become soldiers than our White inhabitants.²⁵

In these few lines, Hamilton implies quite a bit about his thoughts about slavery and of African-Americans. He indicates that he believes that African-Americans desire cultivation, putting to rest the idea that they were barbaric or uncivilized. He equates their “natural faculties” to those of white men, and even says they would sooner become soldiers than a white man because they were used to a life of servitude, which is, arguably, similar to a life in the military. Hamilton does not hesitate to state the truth blatantly; this is something that Henry Cabot Lodge drew attention to his preface to *Papers of Alexander Hamilton* when he wrote that

... he saw appreciated, and admitted facts. Never did he blink them out of sight or go upon a vain shadow-hunt, but always faced them and built upon them or did battle with them as the case might be. There is nothing vague or misty about Hamilton. Every thing is as clear-cut and well-defined as the American landscape on a bright, frosty, autumn day.

The fact that Hamilton relied so heavily on straight facts helps to reduce a fear that he may have been acting and speaking based solely on his emotional judgment and in accordance with his moral standards. A man who finds factual evidence to be so important would be less likely to

²⁵ Ibid.

implement an idea simply because of how he felt about it without substantial evidence to support his opinion.

There was, however, another threat which Hamilton acknowledged to John Jay in 1779 that “it should be considered, that if we do not make use of them in this way, the enemy probably will.”²⁶ It is true that “the British army offered freedom to the slaves owned by colonial rebels, but to win a war, not to establish moral authority for the right rule.”²⁷ Hamilton knew that the colonists would have to take advantage of the extra manpower that enlisting slaves could provide before England did. It was no matter though, as many people thought slaves unfit to be soldiers and balked at the idea of offering them their freedom in exchange for their service. The common opinion of the time was that African-Americans could not be cultured or taught, and that they were just brutes used to work the land. As earlier stated, however, Hamilton felt quite the opposite, using facts to support his belief that slaves would make “excellent soldiers” and condemning those who he believed were ignorant enough to think otherwise.

The idea of using slaves for practical gain was put into practice by Hamilton in many ways, and it suggests that his position on slavery was not necessarily always moral, but was also fluid so that he could easily adopt a pragmatic approach. Pragmatism allowed him to stand with one foot on either side of the line, addressing slavery either morally or practically based on the audience to which he was hoping to gain appeal from. This tactic, whether intentional or not, was a brilliant way for Hamilton to dabble in all areas of the slavery discussion without jeopardizing his own reputation. His ability to adjust his views for different audiences is

²⁶ Alexander Hamilton, Alexander Hamilton to John Jay, March 14, 1779. In *The Founders' Constitution*, edited by Phillip B. Kurland and Ralph Lerner. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, 1:527.

²⁷ Christopher Leslie Brown, “The American Revolution Prompted New Debates About Slavery” *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (2006).

strongly complimented by the sheer amount of influence which he was able to exercise over his contemporaries.

While slavery was integral to the success of the economy in many places at that time, the tensions between a desire for liberty and keeping slaves were at the forefront of the minds of many colonists. *The Federalist Papers* were written after the American Revolution in 1787 and 1788, however the sentiments that were expressed may still be relevant to the events occurring earlier. James Madison briefly wrote of the “unfortunate Africans” and how “it were doubtless to be wished that the power of prohibiting the importation of slaves, had not been postponed until the year 1808, or rather that it had been suffered to have immediate operation.” He believed that “within that period it will receive a considerable discouragement from the federal Government, and may be totally abolished by a concurrence of the few States which continue the unnatural traffic”. Madison, a contemporary of Hamilton, used *The Federalist Papers* as a way to reveal his distaste of slavery, though only briefly. His writing made it quite clear that he felt slavery was losing its popularity and that eventually nobody would deal in “the unnatural traffic” of human bondage. This was partially true, for “in practice, the Revolutionary generation set in motion only a gradual and “grudging emancipation,” in the historian Albert Young’s apt words, and only in those regions where slavery was of limited and declining importance.”²⁸ It was the Revolutionary generation which put the plan into motion that would eventually lead to the emancipation of slaves and even the movement toward civil rights and equality, regardless of how long it actually took achieve.

Desire for Class Status

²⁸ Christopher Leslie Brown, “The American Revolution Prompted New Debates About Slavery” *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (2006).

Although the evidence suggests that Hamilton was an avid abolitionist, there is just as much evidence that while he was against slavery, he did not express his opposition publicly, forcefully, or often. Historian Michelle DuRoss claims that these silences can be interpreted to indicate that Hamilton was not a full-fledged abolitionist. The reasons why he might choose not to say anything again relates to his childhood in the West Indies and how it influenced him later in life. Starting his life as an illegitimate son and then as an orphan, Hamilton was no stranger to hard work and being a part of the lower social classes. He worked hard on the islands, and subsequently while being educated on the mainland in order to provide himself with a higher social status. It was Hamilton's lifelong goal to be a member of the higher circles of society and he was willing to do whatever it took to get him there. Arguably, this is where his frequent silence in regards to slavery originated. Speaking openly against slavery could have damaged his reputation, especially with the higher class, slave-owning families. When he had given so much to the chase of being in a higher class, it would have been foolish for him to throw it all away over a personal opinion, and surely this is how he felt about it. He was concerned about slavery, but not to a point that he was willing to sacrifice himself as a means to an end.

Part of Hamilton's climb to higher circles was his marriage to Elizabeth Schuyler, who belonged to a prominent slaveholding family in New York. As DuRoss argued, "someone opposed to slavery might have trouble marrying into a slaveholding family, but it did not appear to bother Hamilton."²⁹ How could Hamilton have married into a family that owned slaves if he was an abolitionist? This is not to mention that "Hamilton conducted transactions for the purchase and transfer of slaves on behalf of his in-laws and as part of his assignment in the

²⁹ Michelle DuRoss, "Somewhere In Between: Alexander Hamilton and Slavery." *The Early America Review* 9, no. 4 (2010): 2-3.

Continental Army.”³⁰ Had Hamilton been so ardently opposed to slavery, surely he would not have let himself become a part of the transactions? This is not to say that Hamilton was a supporter of slavery, but climbing the ranks of the social ladder was perhaps far more important to him than his personal, moral beliefs about slavery. If he had openly opposed slavery and refused to partake in those transactions, he would have sacrificed his position in the social circle and would have lost many of his influential friendships, such as his relationship with George Washington who was also a slave owner. This, in turn, would weaken his impact on the antislavery movement because he would no longer hold the clout required to have influence on such a topic. So even if he were attempting to help abolish slavery, it would ultimately work against his favor as he lost favor and rank among others.

When Hamilton did speak of giving freedom to slaves, DuRoss argues that it was because he “was motivated by practical terms more so than any ideology that espoused the equality of the races.”³¹ For instance, when Laurens developed the idea that slaves could enlist in the military, “Hamilton supported giving slaves their freedom if they joined the Continental Army because he believed it was in the best interest of America, not because he wanted to free slaves.”³² DuRoss’s claim may be true, but it could also follow that he found it beneficial to both America and to slaves. He may have appreciated the fact that slaves would gain their freedom through this process, but very carefully chose to support it for the more practical service to the country; “the argument that Hamilton’s support of Laurens’ plan shows he was an advocate for the liberty of blacks ignores Hamilton’s motivation for doing so.”³³ Perhaps it does not ignore his

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Michelle DuRoss, “Somewhere In Between: Alexander Hamilton and Slavery.” *The Early America Review* 9, no. 4 (2010): 2-4.

motivation so much as it provides an additional motivation, giving him two fleshed out reasons to support the plan.

Hamilton's concern for property rights was another factor that stopped him from openly advocating in support of the abolition movement. Hamilton understood that property rights were going to factor into representation and that slaves were viewed as property. His sentiments in regard to this remained consistent, which can be seen yet in 1787 by his support of the three-fifths clause of the United States Constitution. The three-fifths clause was an important part of bonding the northern states with the southern states,

since Southerners believed they needed the extra representation to protect their slave system, Hamilton recognized that the three-fifths clause was necessary to create union – without the three-fifths compromise the South would never have agreed to the formation of the United States. They reasoned that without the clause, the North would dominate Congress and could destroy slavery. For

Hamilton, the prosperity of America depended on the union of North and South.³⁴

The three-fifths clause was put in place, partially to protect the institution of slavery, and was also something that Hamilton supported. Hamilton understood that the destruction of slavery would not only endanger the economy, but also the union that was just beginning to come together. Here is an instance where Hamilton put his personal convictions against slavery aside for the sake of the new nation, and “Hamilton's position shows that he favored trade and that the North needed the South to maintain profits. He chose national economic power over taking a stand against slavery.”³⁵

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Michelle DuRoss, “Somewhere In Between: Alexander Hamilton and Slavery.” *The Early America Review* 9, no. 4 (2010):1- 4.

This does not mean that he was not against slavery, however, so much as it indicates his priorities at the time. This is especially true in the speech he gave at the Convention of New York where, about the three-fifths clause, he said that

It will, however, be by no means admitted that the slaves are considered altogether as property. They are men, though degraded to the condition of slavery. They are persons known to the municipal laws of the States which they inhabit, as well as to the laws of nature.³⁶

This passage shows the incredibly real tensions between the government and natural rights which were prevalent at the time. It also shows the mental tug of war that Hamilton most likely experienced when trying to maintain his political and legal reputation while still catering to his own personal beliefs, religious or otherwise.

Argument for Humanity and Religion

Though DuRoss brings to the forefront a compelling and thorough argument, she overlooks some of Hamilton's own writings, which offer some of the most clear and direct pieces of evidence of his condemnation of slavery. Though much of Hamilton's writings are aimed at his professional life – politics, economics, law – he also wrote thoughtfully on more personal subjects such as morals and the laws of humanity. Many of his writings were published, so he showed no fear in making these declarations openly, even when his reputation may have been on the line in exchange doing so. As is obvious today, he was exalted and praised for many of his ideas and regarded as being an intelligent and convincing man. He was, perhaps, influential enough that his thoughts were not immediately condemned or criticized, but were instead considered carefully and widely disseminated.

³⁶ Alexander Hamilton, "Convention of New York" In *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (Federal Edition). New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904. Vol. 2.

Hamilton was willing to call the practices of humans into question, not just in terms of practical or emotional ties, but also through logic. He attacked the common sense and exalted the rights of mankind by pointing out that

... Whence arises that violent antipathy they seem to entertain, not only to the natural rights of mankind, but to common-sense and common-modesty? That they are enemies to the natural rights of mankind is manifest, because they wish to see one part of their species enslaved by another. That they have an invincible aversion to common-sense is apparent in many respects: they endeavor to persuade us that ... slavery, so far from being a great evil, is a great blessing.³⁷

This is a poignant message, applying the idea that the rights of mankind belong to not just one race, but to all. Because Hamilton viewed African-Americans as fellow human beings, he had a distinct advantage over many other people. The dehumanization of slaves is a large part of why people in the eighteenth century felt it was acceptable to treat them as property and reduce them to the conditions of animals. Hamilton saw them for what they were: humans. Armed with this knowledge, if it can be called that, he was able to use the principles of logic to make his case. It also opened up to him new ideas and opinions that were not available to those who saw the slave as below other human beings.

Though it was not one of the prominent features of his life, Hamilton's religious background most likely had an impact on his views about slavery in terms of morality and humanity. As a young man, he was an Orthodox Presbyterian, taught by John Witherspoon of the "New Light" school of thought, as opposed to the "Old Light" Calvinists.³⁸ A man named Robert Troup, who was his roommate in college, noticed that he was "in the habit of praying on

³⁷ Alexander Hamilton, "A Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress". In *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (Federal Edition). New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904. Vol. 1.

³⁸ Forrest McDonald. *Alexander Hamilton: A Biography* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979.

his knees night and morning.”³⁹ However, as Hamilton matured and gained notoriety, he became more of an irregular churchgoer, and it is thought that

Like Adams, Franklin, and Jefferson, Hamilton had probably fallen under the sway of deism, which sought to substitute reason for revelation and dropped the notion of an active God that will intervene in human affairs. At the same time, he never doubted God’s existence, embracing Christianity as a system of morality and cosmic justice.⁴⁰

This is very telling of Hamilton’s orientation with religion and how it may have come into play with his opinions. Swaying towards deism allowed him to apply the uses of reason to his already logical thinking style, removing any fantastical elements. At the same time, he used Christianity as a means to develop and support his moral inclinations.

Though he would not openly come out and reference any spiritual stance on the subject of slavery, it may stem from his religious beliefs when he wrote that

All men have one common original: they participate in one common nature, and consequently have one common right. No reasons can be assigned why one man should exercise any power or pre-eminence over his fellow-creatures more than another; unless they have voluntarily vested him with it.⁴¹

Hamilton does not come right out and use the term “slaves”, but it is quite obvious what he meant. In his logical manner, he recognizes that there is no justifiable way for one human to rule over another by force. Though however logical he may be, this passage is tinted with a sense of morality, which cannot be evenly applied to every person due to its subjective nature. Either

³⁹ John Church Hamilton. *The Life of Alexander Hamilton, Volume 1* New York: Halsted & Voorhies, 1834.

⁴⁰ Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Books 2005).

⁴¹ Alexander Hamilton, “A Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress” In *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (Federal Edition). New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904. Vol. 1.

way, Hamilton made it very clear that slavery did not fall into line with his personal beliefs about the nature and rights of man.

Hamilton also believed in the instinct of man to act in self-preservation, which can be applied to the issue of slavery easily. In more of his musings about the nature of humanity, Hamilton wrote

... but humanity does not require us to sacrifice our own security and welfare to the convenience or advantage of others. Self-preservation is the first principle of our nature. When our lives and properties are at stake, it would be fooling and unnatural to refrain from such measures as might preserve them because they would be detrimental to others.⁴²

By no means, can, or should, it be argued that Hamilton would be in support of a slave uprising against slave owners, particularly since it would most likely end in extreme violence. However, he did feel it perfectly natural, and right, for a human being to want to act in self-interest, protecting themselves and their property from abusive treatment.

Using the idea of humanity to support his arguments is a protocol which would even be applicable to many of today's issues. He was ahead of the curve in acknowledging that African-Americans were simply human beings and that they should be entitled to the same rights as other humans were. This view was shared later on, in 1829, by James Madison who wrote, "But the mere circumstance of complexion cannot deprive them of the character of men"⁴³. This belief came too early, at a time when most people still dehumanized the slave, working them like animals in the fields. It may not have to be supposed that this dehumanization was simply bred

⁴² Alexander Hamilton, "A Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress" In *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (Federal Edition). New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904. Vol. 1.

⁴³ James Madison, "Speech to Virginia Convention, December 2, 1829. In *The Writings of James Madison V9, 1819-1836: Comprising His Public Papers and His Private Correspondence*, edited by Gaillard Hunt. Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2010 (original work published in 1910).

out of ignorance or sincere beliefs. It is perfectly logical to suppose that many people knew that enslaving the African-Americans was wrong, but used dehumanization as a means to justify it and potentially reduce their own underlying guilt at how they were treating fellow humans.

Contemporaries

To say that Alexander Hamilton was in good company would be an understatement. There were many brilliant minds working alongside him who desired the founding of a new nation just as much as he did. However, many of them were slave owners, though a few were not. Just because they were slave owners did not always mean that they favored slavery, a juxtaposition can be boggling for many people today. Hamilton himself never owned slaves; the same can be said for John Adams and Thomas Paine. Shortly after the Revolution, John Adams discussed his feelings on slavery in some of his personal letters. His most blatant remark was that “[Slavery is a] foul contagion in the human character”⁴⁴ which leaves no question as how Adams felt. In Adams’ writings, he often relies upon emotionally charged statements, referencing his moral dilemma, which is quite opposite of Hamilton’s many statements of fact. Adams once wrote that “Every measure of prudence, therefore, ought to be assumed for the eventual total extirpation of slavery from the United States ... I have, throughout my life, held the practice of slavery in abhorrence.”⁴⁵ While Hamilton worked hard to cover his moral influences and replace them with logical arguments, Adams says much the same thing, but in a way to applies to the emotions of the reader.

Among Hamilton’s contemporaries who did own slaves were men such as Benjamin Franklin, Patrick Henry, John Hancock, John Jay, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and

⁴⁴ John Adams, John Adams to Colonel Ward, January 8, 1810. In *John Adams* by David McCullough. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001.

⁴⁵ John Adams, John Adams to Colonel Ward, January 8, 1810. In *John Adams* by David McCullough. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001.

George Washington. Jay, Madison, and Washington are especially relevant as Hamilton worked closely with them during his career. Patrick Henry was one of the greatest rhetoric writers of the time, often swaying the public with great success. In a personal letter he wrote

Is it not amazing that at a time when the rights of humanity are defined and understood with precision, in a country, above all others, fond of liberty--that in such an age and in such a country we find men professing a religion the most humane, mild, gentle and generous, adopting a principle as repugnant to humanity as it is inconsistent with the Bible, and destructive to liberty?⁴⁶

In this passage, Henry appealed to the idea of liberty, rights of humanity, and responsibilities of Christianity in order to make his point. Though it cannot be said if it was intentional, his attention to the seeming lack of common sense could have served to embarrass a reader into guilty feelings.

Of Hamilton's closest circle, there were also writings about slavery. Studying the viewpoints of those closest to him can offer insight into his character, just by association. John Jay felt that

It is much to be wished that slavery may be abolished. The honour of the States, as well as justice and humanity, in my opinion, loudly call upon them to emancipate these unhappy people. To contend for our own liberty, and to deny that blessing to others, involves an inconsistency not to be excused.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Patrick Henry. Patrick Henry to Robert Pleasants, 1773. In *The Monument of Patriotism, Being a Collection of Biographical Sketches of Some of Those Men Who Signed the Independence of America* by John Royer. London: Forgotten Books, 2013 (original work published in 1825).

⁴⁷ John Jay, John Jay to R. Lushington, March 15, 1786. In *Our Sacred Honor: Words of Advice from the Founders in Stories, Letters, Poems, and Speeches* by William J. Bennett. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997.

Though an honorable sentiment, it must be put into question by the fact that Jay was a slave owner himself. It places doubt on the sincerity of such a statement. George Washington was also a slave owner, but he was able to redeem and justify himself in his “Last Will and Testament” when he declared that

Upon the decease [of] my wife, it is my Will and desire th[at] all the Slaves which I hold in [my] own right, shall receive their free[dom] The Negroes thus bound, are (by their Masters or Mistresses) to be taught to read and write; and to be brought up to some useful occupation, agreeably to the Laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia, providing for the support of Orphan and other poor Children. And I do hereby expressly forbid the Sale, or transportation out of the said Commonwealth, of any Slave I may die possessed of, under any pretence [sic]whatsoever.⁴⁸

Though Washington maintained his slaves during his lifetime, it was his wish that ultimately they receive their freedom and were educated enough to be literate members of society. While Jay, Madison, and Washington were all slaveholders, they were not supportive of the institution itself and often wrote or spoke against it. This is telling, because they were some of Hamilton’s closest friends and colleagues, so it would make sense for them to have shared beliefs which they could discuss with one another.

Conclusion

Often, Hamilton’s actions showed that while he may have had a personal distaste for slavery, he did not let this interfere with his own personal and social gains from the institution or with the formation of the nation. As DuRoss stated,

⁴⁸ George Washington, “Last Will and Testament”, July 9, 1799. In *George Washington: A Biographical Companion* by Frank E. Grizzard. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2002.

Hamilton was not an advocate of slavery, but when the issue of slavery came into conflict with his personal ambitions, his belief in property rights, or his belief of what would promote American's interests, Hamilton chose those goals over opposing slavery. In the instances where Hamilton supported granting freedom to blacks, his primary motive was based more on practical concerns rather than an ideological view of slavery as immoral.⁴⁹

Perhaps Hamilton made choices that favored the developing country first, planning on tackling the issue of slavery later on. Though many of his motives may have been practical, they could have been supplemented by moral agendas in the background. Hamilton's hard work paid off by giving him a seat in higher social circles, but he had to be extremely careful of what he said and did in order to maintain his position.

The dominant purpose of Hamilton's life was the creation of a national sentiment, and thereby the making of a great and powerful nation from the discordant elements furnished by thirteen jarring States. To the accomplishment of this purpose every thing he said and did as a public man was steadily and strongly directed.⁵⁰

Often times, this included his dealing with slavery firsthand, regardless of whether it was against his personal convictions. Hamilton lived a life that focused mostly on nation-building as his primary task. This meant that while he may have had concerns and opinions about slavery, there were more important duties laid out for him to tackle. As can be seen, he was willing to become

⁴⁹ Michelle DuRoss, "Somewhere In Between: Alexander Hamilton and Slavery." *The Early America Review* 9, no. 4 (2010):1- 4.

⁵⁰ Henry Cabot Lodge, "Preface". In *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (Federal Edition). New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904. Vol. 1.

a part of a slaveholding family as well as handle their transactions regarding slaves, which is a perfect example of him putting his social status before his personal beliefs.

To say that all of Hamilton's intentions for being of a higher social class were due to his desire to build a firm and steady nation would be narrow-minded. Though it is true that he exercised his reputation in such a way as to influence his contemporaries, especially those of a higher status, into ideas and policies that would eventually help the young nation grow, he also had more personal interests at stake. His want to run in the higher circles could seem selfish or shallow, but it sources back to his childhood. He had lived in poverty growing up and had toiled incredibly hard to work his way up, eventually coming to America and attending school. It is because of this past poverty that he held on tightly to every social gain that he made, at times putting it well ahead of his other personal convictions. To openly declare his disapproval of slavery would have been a social suicide for Hamilton, and this was something he was not willing to risk after working so hard to get where he was.

Hamilton was not the only one who had concerns about slavery. During the years of the American Revolution, slavery was less popular, but gained popularity after the American Revolution. It was a debate that often circulated, but had little involvement from the founding fathers: "It is telling that in this debate, Hamilton, a staunch abolitionist, remained stubbornly silent rather than jeopardize his financial program."⁵¹ Hamilton joined the many other founding fathers in this silence, as many people did not want to touch the topic at a time when a new country was being birthed. Though many of them wrote about in personal correspondence, it was not something that was often addressed publicly. It was a far more important political agenda to solidify the ties between colonies than it was to take up the issue of slavery.

⁵¹ Jay Winik, *The Great Upheaval: America and the Birth of the Modern World 1788-1800* New York: Harper Perennial, 2008.

Though his actions spoke of one view his words spoke of another. As he wrote in “A Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress” “No person that has enjoyed the sweets of liberty can be insensible of its infinite value, or can reflect on its reverse without horror and detestation.”⁵² Perhaps this is most telling of his true personal convictions, regardless of what his actions were. His writings are readily available and numerous in number, offering a direct line to his thoughts, regardless of his actions. Though his actions did offer some insight into his priorities, it is his writings that really accentuate how he truly felt about slavery, even if indirectly. However, to mark him as an avid abolitionist may be taking it a step too far. Surely he was not in support of slavery, but he also did very little in terms of action to display these feelings, often choosing only to write about it. It was his personal interests and political agenda that got the best of him and ultimately determined how he would act, though not always what he would write.

When Hamilton did write or speak out against slavery, he often tried to back up his argument with factual statements, choosing to avoid embellishments through emotional appeal. That being said, he did at times make reference to how slavery related to morals, human rights, or religion. He, along with others, felt that skin color did not differentiate between man and beast, nor did it indicate someone’s ability to learn or being citizens of a society. To Hamilton, discrimination due to race was nothing but a complete waste of human potential. He saw merchants and soldiers and trade partners in African-Americans when so many people saw nothing but hard labor.

⁵² Alexander Hamilton, “A Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress” In *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (Federal Edition). New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904. Vol. 1.

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